

CHS CLOSING DOWNTOWN GRAIN ELEVATOR; BEGINS MOVE TO RAIL PARK

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The CHS Inc. grain elevator on West Center Street in Kalispell will close at the end of the week, marking the end of 111 years of elevator operation at that site in downtown Kalispell. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

CHS will stop operating its downtown Kalispell grain elevator by the end of the week, according to CHS Mountain West Co-op General Manager Mark Lalum.

Shuttering the elevator operations, which have been running since 1908, is a major milestone in CHS' transition out of downtown and into the new Glacier Rail Park.

"We're getting ready to close it down...It's kind of a big deal," Lalum said modestly.

Before the elevator operation is retired, the final step for CHS is to empty the last of the grain from the elevator's stockpiles.

"It's bittersweet," he added, remembering all the "love and sweat" poured into the elevator for more than a century.

It was the Farmers Protective Association that made plans in 1908 to build an elevator. According to the May 1, 1908, edition of The Inter Lake, the association's stockholders met to talk about letting bids for both a warehouse and an elevator.

"The warehouse will probably be built first, as it is more urgently needed, but the elevator will be ready for the fall business," The Inter Lake reported. "It is to have a capacity of 100,000 bushels and will be equipped with all the labor saving devices to facilitate the handling of grain."

W.H. Hunt of Kalispell won the contract for warehouse, which was to be used largely for the storage and handling of potatoes, the newspaper reported in 1908. Contract for the elevator was let to T.F. Costello of Minneapolis. Combined cost of the warehouse and elevator was somewhere between \$25,000 and \$30,000.

For the past few weeks, they have been getting the old grain out and transitioning all of their new product into the Glacier Rail Park facility. By mid-October, Lalum said about 95% of the grain from the old elevator had been emptied.

He also noted the rail service to the downtown elevator stopped last week. He said this development is "definitely a big deal to the city" because they can "move forward with the railroad track." The plan is to remove the now-defunct tracks and replace them with a 2-mile trail that will extend through downtown and connect to the existing Great Northern Historical Trail.

The active rail tracks through downtown were the last major impediment preventing the city from moving forward with building the trail. These recent developments are "all related to getting the tracks out of town," Kalispell Planning Director Tom Jentz said.

Lalum acknowledged the progress on this plan is "way behind" the original moving date of May 2019, but added that CHS is "getting it done." He said the delays mostly came from unexpected technical intricacies of moving its complicated operations, but he said, "I think we're progressing well now.

"Now the work comes," from CHS' perspective, Lalum said. "We have to move all our stuff."

But he was optimistic about the recent progress and reported the new grain elevator is already up and running. Even though CHS previously had considered a slightly different location closer to U.S. 2, he said they are excited about their operations in the new facility.

The next component of the transition to the rail park will be the closure of the CHS location at 150 First Ave. W. The company expects to close that gas station and convenience store by the end of the year as CHS opens a replacement gas station in the rail park.

Unlike the current commercial station on First Avenue West, however, the fueling station in the rail park will only serve truck drivers who make deliveries and shipments to CHS. Only professionals registered with CHS will have access to the new facility, according to Jentz.

The new CHS site will include a steel grain facility with 470,000-bushel storage capacity and a 4,700-ton capacity fertilizer plant, both strategically situated with access to a 54-car rail track operated by Mission Mountain Railroad. CHS Mountain West expects to handle approximately 11,000 tons of fertilizer and move 1.7

million bushels of various grains annually through the facility, according to the company's website. The site will also include product warehouse space and an ag supply retail store, bringing the three CHS Mountain West locations in Kalispell onto one campus.

CHS will be joined by Northwest Drywall and potential other tenants in the rail park as it develops.

Reporter Bret Anne Serbin may be reached at bserbin@dailyinterlake.com or 758-4459.

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